

Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV

How is HIV transmitted?

HIV is transmitted (passed) from one person to another through specific body fluids—blood, semen, genital fluids, and breast milk. Having **unprotected sex** or sharing needles with an HIV-infected person are the most common ways HIV is transmitted.

An HIV-infected mother can transmit HIV to her baby during pregnancy, during labor and delivery, or by breastfeeding. Anti-HIV medications help prevent **mother-to-child transmission of HIV**.

Because HIV can be transmitted through breast milk, HIV-infected mothers should not breastfeed their babies. In the United States, baby formula is a safe and healthy alternative to breastfeeding. HIV can also be transmitted through food that was prechewed by an HIV-infected mother or caretaker. To be safe, babies should not be fed prechewed food.

HIV **cannot** be transmitted through casual contact, such as hugging and closed-mouth kissing. HIV also **cannot** be transmitted by items such as dishes, drinking glasses, toilet seats, or door knobs shared with an HIV-infected person.

How do anti-HIV medications help prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV?

Taking anti-HIV medications during pregnancy reduces the amount of HIV in an infected mother's body. Having less HIV in the body reduces the risk of mother-to-child transmission of HIV.

Anti-HIV medications also pass from the pregnant mother to her unborn baby through the **placenta** (also called the **afterbirth**). The anti-HIV medication in the baby's body helps protect the baby from HIV infection. This is especially important during delivery when the baby is exposed to HIV in the mother's birth canal or to the mother's blood during a **cesarean delivery**.

The anti-HIV medication babies receive after birth also helps prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV.

Terms Used in This Fact Sheet:

Unprotected sex: sex without using a condom.

Mother-to-child transmission of HIV: the passing of HIV from an HIV-infected mother to her infant during pregnancy, during labor and delivery, or by breastfeeding.

Placenta (also called the afterbirth): sac that develops within the mother's womb during pregnancy to provide the baby with oxygen and nutrition.

Cesarean delivery (C-section): delivering a baby by making an incision in the mother's abdomen.

Regimen: Anti-HIV medications are grouped into "classes" according to how they fight HIV. A regimen is a combination of three or more anti-HIV medications from at least two different classes.

AZT: an anti-HIV medication in the nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitor (NRTI) class. AZT is also called zidovudine, Retrovir, or ZDV.

Intravenous (IV): to give a medication through a needle directly into a vein.

When are anti-HIV medications used to prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV?

Anti-HIV medications are used at the following times to prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV:

- **During pregnancy**, HIV-infected pregnant women receive a **regimen** (combination) of at least three different anti-HIV medications. If possible, **AZT** is included as one of the anti-HIV medications in the regimen.
- **During labor and delivery**, HIV-infected pregnant women receive **intravenous (IV)** AZT. They also continue to take the other anti-HIV medications in their regimen by mouth.
- **After birth**, babies born to HIV-infected mothers receive liquid AZT for 6 weeks.

An HIV-infected pregnant woman may also need anti-HIV medications **for her own health**. Some HIV-infected women may already be on an anti-HIV regimen before becoming pregnant. Prenatal care for these women will include a review of the anti-HIV medications they are taking. Because during pregnancy certain anti-HIV medications may not be safe or

may be absorbed differently by the body, the medications in their regimens may change.

Regular medical care and use of anti-HIV medications as recommended will protect your health and the health of your baby.

For more information on what anti-HIV medications to take and when to start them, see the [Anti-HIV Medications for Use in Pregnancy](#) fact sheet.

For more information:

Contact an AIDSinfo Health Information Specialist at 1-800-448-0440 or <http://aidsinfo.nih.gov>. See your health care provider for medical advice.